

Metaphysical topography: a review of Catherine Farish's Geomancy

by Alyson Champ [The Gleaner](#) 2023-10-18



Large woodcut prints by Havelock based printmaker Catherine Farish currently on display in the Atrium of the MUHC Research Institute PHOTO Alyson Champ

In one form of the ancient practice of Geomancy, the answers to specific questions or knowledge of the future may be discovered by interpreting the patterns and hidden connections on the Earth's surface. Like a divinatory art, the work of Havelock-based printmaker Catherine Farish also seems tuned-in to mysterious frequencies. Geomancy is the fitting title of the artist's most recent offering of large woodcut prints currently on display in the atrium of the MUHC Research Institute, an unexpected sanctuary within the busy Glen hospital complex.

Woodcut printing is a traditional technique where an image is carved into a wooden block, the raised areas are inked, and the surface is pressed onto paper to create an image. With Geomancy, as with all her work, Farish breaks boundaries and transforms an old technique into something new.

The Gulf, for example, shows the graphic boldness typical of the traditional technique. Some pieces, such as An Inlet, incorporate swaths of printed colour, or are overprinted in different orientations and colours on the same sheet (Mountains). Sometimes the

same image is printed twice, with the two prints hung side by side with one inverted (Turquoise Diptych); others are combined into large, continuous, near-symmetrical images (the Blue and Green Deltas, Vibrations); while still others are cut up and reassembled as collages.

The prints in Geomancy are about our relationship with the planet and are unified by their point of view. According to the gallery text, the artist was inspired by satellite images, and the resulting near-abstract works resemble maps. The landscape is seen from above and includes the clusters of lights or rings of roadways of a city; the crossing and overlapping lines of elevations; the sinuous curves of river deltas; or coastlines delineated by staccato marks set against broad, calm expanses of colour. The viewer is given the pleasure of deciphering the images: Which parts belong to what? How has the image been made or altered? Is this Covey Hill? London? Oceans, mountains, landmasses – these landscapes may be real, but they also exist beyond the realm of the ordinary, like topographic maps of a metaphysical realm.

The works are beautifully balanced in colour, in use of space, and in energy. The marks left behind by the artist's tools are lively yet orderly. Repeated images and colours speak to the interconnectedness of all things. Farish limits her colour palette to white, blue, green, and black, through which she suggests light, life, the depths of glacial waters, and the vast expanse of the cosmos.

Geomancy has immediate visual appeal. It is also difficult to imagine standing before these artworks and feeling nothing. Farish's new work, like all the best works of art, invites personal introspection. It is an opportunity to feel and to reflect upon our feelings, to connect with the elemental forces that shape our world, and to explore the unseen threads that bind us to the earth and each other.

Geomancy by Catherine Farish continues until October 27, 2023. The gallery of the Research Institute of the MUHC is part of the RBC Art and Heritage Centre and is found in the Atrium of the E wing ground floor of the Glen Site, 1001 boulevard Décarie, Montréal. The works may also be viewed on the artist's website at catherinefarish.com.